



OFFICE OF
COUNTY CLERK-RECORDER

MODESTO, CALIFORNIA 95353

DAVID A. WURM, COUNTY CLERK-RECORDER
PAT SEIDEL, ASSISTANT RECORDER
KAREN MATHEWS, ASSISTANT REGISTRAR OF VOTERS

February 2, 1990

INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENTAL
STUDIES LIBRARY

APR - 4 1990

To: Board of Supervisors

From: Elections Division

Re: MAIL-IN ELECTIONS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Recently you asked the staff to study the feasibility of conducting "mail-in" elections. Your request was prompted by the high cost (approximately \$740,000) of the three special elections we have had to conduct in the wake of former Congressman Coelho's resignation.

Our conclusions are set forth below. We have also provided some options you may wish to consider should you decide to pursue this matter.

CONCLUSIONS

In studying the mail-in election issue, we've reviewed our experience with the three mail-in elections conducted in Stanislaus County (all three involved City of Modesto elections), discussed the matter with election officials in other counties, and reviewed a study entitled American All-Mail Balloting: A Summation of a Decade's Experience, which was published by the University of California at Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies. The latter was kindly sent to us by its author, Mr. Randy H. Hamilton. Based on our research and experience, we have concluded that:

- Mail-in elections can be conducted at a significantly lower cost than normal "polling place" elections. In June 1989 for example, the City of Modesto conducted a one-issue election by mail. The cost was \$79,000. We estimate a regular polling place election would have cost \$120,000. Similarly, we estimate that the three special elections which followed former Congressman Coelho's resignation would have cost approximately \$400,000 if they had been conducted by mail.
- The available evidence suggests that mail-in elections offer several other advantages, including quicker election returns, reductions in number of voided ballots and, most importantly, higher voter participation. With respect to the latter, for example, the turnout in Modesto's June 1989 election was 47%, which was markedly higher than the city turnout in any of the subsequent three special elections. Mr. Hamilton's study found higher voter turnouts usually occurred with mail-in balloting.
- Contrary to the perception of some, mail-in elections could increase the integrity of elections. In a mail-in election, the validating signature of each voter would be checked and verified by election officials. Currently, this is done only on absentee ballots. In addition, mail-in elections would provide -- to some degree -- an automatic voter purge process, since

undeliverable ballots would be returned to the Elections Office. In Modesto's June 1989 election this process resulted in 8,000 voters being purged.

- The absentee ballot process is virtually identical to the way in which a mail-in election would be conducted. There is a clear trend toward increasing voter use of absentee ballots, prompted in part by more aggressive efforts in this area by the major political parties. In last Tuesday's special election for example, 54% of the ballots cast in Stanislaus County were absentees.
- Notwithstanding the above, we have some concerns about mail-in elections which should be brought to your attention. Generally, it appears that such elections have been employed mainly in relatively low-key, non-partisan races. Moreover, most mail-in elections have been conducted within comparatively small geographical areas (e.g., cities, school districts, special districts, etc.). It is conceivable that problems could arise if mail-in elections were employed in hotly contested issues or on a wider geographical basis.

For example, some critics fear that the use of mail-in ballots may compromise the voter secrecy which exists in polling place elections, and encourage voter intimidation or bribery. Although such concerns may prove invalid, they provide, given the importance of the election process, sufficient grounds for a cautious approach to mail-in balloting.

- Some people view the act of voting at a specified polling place as an important civic and social function. Although the staff cannot place a value on such concerns, they nevertheless should be considered in any evaluation of mail-in elections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Should the Board wish to proceed with the issue of mail-in elections, we feel, based on the above, that a cautious, deliberate approach should be taken. Although there are several options you could pursue, we feel two should be brought to your attention. They are not mutually exclusive:

1. You could seek legislation allowing the County to conduct -- on a pilot program basis -- an upcoming county-wide election by mail. A good choice might be the Uniform Special District Election (UDEL) scheduled for November 1991. This election will probably not involve any controversial or partisan county-wide issues.
2. Since the mail-in election issue is really of statewide significance, you may wish to ask the Secretary of State's Office to initiate a study of the matter and conduct public hearings on the study's conclusions.



C124902810